

## Helpful Context for Reading the Old Testament

**NOTE:** These notes are compiled by Dawn and Tyson Wright, two nerds with a stack of books and an internet connection, who do not have seminary degrees. These are just meant to be some helpful hints and do not constitute the official position of the Episcopal Church or St. Michaels Carmichael.

### Literary Context

We talk about the Bible as “a” book, but it is many books written from a variety of source material and then compiled and edited and canonized over many centuries. Our Old Testament is comprised of Hebrew Scriptures that were created within and for a particular literary context.

### Ancient Near Eastern Literature

Hebrew literature didn’t happen in a vacuum. Other Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) cultures were composing oral and written literature, and some of the Hebrew works are retellings of familiar stories, but with their own “twist”, showing how the Hebrew God was different than the others. For example, several cultures had creation stories and stories involving a massive flood.

### The Documentary Hypothesis

The leading model in Biblical criticism for how the first five books of the bible – the Torah or the Pentateuch – were written is the Documentary Hypothesis, which sees the Torah as having been composed by editors out of four major strands of literary traditions. Then between the Return from the Babylonian Exile and Alexander the Great conquering Persia, a person (or much more likely persons) compiled the different sources into a single text. The interesting thing is that when there were two stories, the editors often chose to preserve both stories, which is why we have two different creation stories, and why the story of Joseph is a mashup of two different versions.

### Genre

The Old Testament is made up of many books in many genres of writing:

Genre	Description
Myth	Myths are traditional stories used by a people group to understand something about their world. They may be factual or fictional (or a blend of the two) but relating some facts about the past is almost never their purpose – they are intended to help their audience make sense of things right now.
“History”	In the modern world we have specific ideas about what it means to write history, but most of those ideas were invented after the time period in which the Old Testament was written. Knowing when the books were written is important, because they are trying to help a people group understand themselves, why they have the troubles they have, etc., much more than they are about accurately recounting the past. They may align with our modern idea of history at times (and often does) but that was not why they were written.
Genealogy	Many of the books have extended genealogies. This is less like Ancestry.com and more like an Icelandic saga where we get a few generations listed for every character. The point is to place this person in their social context and give a reader familiar with these genealogies a way to think about the characters.
Prophecy	Prophecy is not fortunetelling – prophecy is a prophet speaking for God. It may be framed in future terms, but it is really about the present, providing insight to people on how they ought

Genre	Description
	to behave right now. All the written prophecies we have in the Old Testament were written in response to one of the major crises (see below) so knowing more about the time of writing can help a reader better understand the original intent of the prophet.
Treaties	Parts of the Old Testament are written following the format of ancient suzerainty treaties (for example, the outline of Deuteronomy matches Hittite treaties, but with God as the suzerain).
Legal Codes	Legal codes were common throughout the Ancient Near East. Maybe the best known of these today is the Code of Hammurabi from Old Babylon, but the Assyrians, Hittites, Egyptians, and many others also had legal codes prior to the writing of the Bible. In many cases Old Testament laws are closely matched with laws from other nations, sometimes nearly a word-for-word translation, sometimes with a significant twist on previous codes.
Poetry	Poetry in the Old Testament includes the Psalms, much of the writings of the prophets, and other songs that are mixed into other sections. Ancient Hebrew poetry often depends on the sounds of words, punning, and other wordplay (that doesn’t often translate into English very well). The one technique that does translate well is parallelism, where something is described twice in different ways.
Apocalypse	Like prophecy, apocalypse uses future events as a literary device. This is similar to modern science fiction, which uses events set in the future to provide commentary and clarity about the present. The word Apocalypse means ‘Revelation’, meaning something new is revealed to the reader. Another similarity to science fiction is the use of standard tropes – science fiction has spaceships and ray guns, apocalypse has mythical beasts and giant battles, etc.
Wisdom	This is a genre common across the ANE where a wise person makes statements about God and about living a virtuous life. Not uncommon to have contradictory statements (see Proverbs 26:4 – 5 for example) because the purpose is not to provide a checklist for living but to help the reader to live wisely (which may entail contradictions).

## Historical Context

Like all writing, the writings in the Hebrew Scriptures were written within and in response to a historical place and time. Knowing some of the historical context can help make sense of what the writers were getting at.

### Set, Written, and Compiled

When reading the Old Testament it is helpful to keep in mind that a story or poem may be set in a particular time, but have been written far later (perhaps using old characters and events to comment on what was currently happening) and then compiled at an even later time, by editor(s) that had their own agenda for using the writing.

### The Four Crises

Much of the Hebrew scriptures were written in response to four important crises in history:

**The Assyrian Crises:** Assyria menaces Israel and Judah for centuries, eventually completely destroying the Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE and destroying most of the cities in the Kingdom of Judah and unsuccessfully besieging Jerusalem in 701 BCE.

**The Babylonian Crisis:** Babylon destroyed Assyria (first destroying their capitol, Ninevah, in 612, finally ending the Assyrian Empire in 605 at the Battle of Carchemish). Babylon conquered Judah in 597 BCE and sent many Judean

leaders into exile. After a revolt 10 years later, Babylon conquered Judah again, destroyed Jerusalem, leveled the Temple, and sent many more Judeans into exile in Babylon. (A third group was exiled to Babylon in 582 BCE.)

**The Return Crisis:** The Persians conquered the Babylonians in 539 BCE, and the Persian emperor allowed the Judeans to return to Judea and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. It is not the triumphant return they hoped for, with struggles against many local enemies.

**The Seleucid Crisis:** After Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire, and then died, his generals carved up his empire, with Judea falling into the Seleucid Empire (although occasionally being part of the Ptolemaic Kingdom). Seleucid Emperor Antiochus IV Epiphanes (reigned from 175 to 164) decided to end the policy of allowing Jews to practice their own religion (he sacrificed a pig on the altar of the Jerusalem Temple, sprinkled the blood of it on the Hebrew holy books, made circumcision illegal, etc.). This led to the Maccabean Revolt, which ended up setting up a short-lived Jewish kingdom (the Hasmonean Kingdom, 141 – 37 BCE).

## Notes on Old Testament Books

Book	Author	Setting	Written	Edited/Compiled
Genesis	The four sources: Jahwist (J) Elohists (E) Priestly (P) Deuteronomist (D)	Creation of the world until the end of the Bronze Age / early Iron Age I	J and E: between 922 BCE and 722 BCE P: between 600 and 400 BCE D: between 640 and 609 BCE	5 <sup>th</sup> C BCE
Exodus				
Leviticus				
Numbers				
Deuteronomy				
Joshua	Deuteronomist historian	Early Iron Age	7 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	5 <sup>th</sup> C BCE
Judges				
Ruth	Unknown		500 BCE – 330 BCE	500 BCE – 330 BCE
Samuel	Deuteronomist historian	Mid 10 <sup>th</sup> C through Early 6 <sup>th</sup> C	7 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	5 <sup>th</sup> C BCE
Kings				
Chronicles	Possibly Ezra the Scribe	Early Iron Age through Early 6 <sup>th</sup> C	5 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	Multiple layers of revision, some probably as late as the Hasmonean period (141 BCE – 37 BCE)
Ezra				
Nehemiah				
Esther	Unknown	4 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	4 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	4 <sup>th</sup> C BCE
Job	Unknown	Already ancient by 6 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	Between 6 <sup>th</sup> C and 4 C BCE	Between 6 <sup>th</sup> C and 4 C BCE
Psalms	Many	10 <sup>th</sup> C BCE through 4 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	10 <sup>th</sup> C BCE through 4 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	Between 6 <sup>th</sup> C and 4 C BCE

Book	Author	Setting	Written	Edited/Compiled
Proverbs	Many	10 <sup>th</sup> C BCE through 4 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	10 <sup>th</sup> C BCE through 4 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	Between 6 <sup>th</sup> C and 4 C BCE
Ecclesiastes	Unknown	10 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	5 <sup>th</sup> C through 2 <sup>nd</sup> C BCE	5 <sup>th</sup> C through 2 <sup>nd</sup> C BCE
Song of Solomon	Unknown	10 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	Between 6 <sup>th</sup> C and 4 C BCE	Between 6 <sup>th</sup> C and 4 C BCE
Isaiah	Proto-Isaiah (ch 1 – 39): Isaiah Deutero-Isaiah: Unknown Trito-Isaiah: Unknown	mid-8 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	Proto-Isaiah: mid-8 <sup>th</sup> C BCE Deutero-Isaiah: late-6 <sup>th</sup> C BCE Trito-Isaiah: Late 6 <sup>th</sup> or early 5 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	5 <sup>th</sup> C BCE
Jeremiah	Jeremiah and his followers	6 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	6 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	5 <sup>th</sup> – 2 <sup>nd</sup> C BCE
Lamentations	Unknown	6 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	6 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	5 <sup>th</sup> C BCE
Ezekiel	Ezekiel	6 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	6 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	5 <sup>th</sup> – 2 <sup>nd</sup> C BCE
Daniel	Unknown	6 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	2 <sup>nd</sup> C BCE	2 <sup>nd</sup> C BCE
Hosea	Hosea	8 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	8 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	8 <sup>th</sup> C BCE
Joel	Joel	Unknown	Unknown (arguments exist for anything from 9 <sup>th</sup> C BCE to 4 <sup>th</sup> C BCE)	Unknown
Amos	Amos	8 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	8 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	8 <sup>th</sup> C BCE
Obadiah	Obadiah	6 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	6 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	6 <sup>th</sup> C BCE
Jonah	Unknown	9 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	Between 4 <sup>th</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> C BCE	Between 4 <sup>th</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> C BCE
Micah	Micah (and others)	8 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	8 <sup>th</sup> C BCE, 5 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	5 <sup>th</sup> / 4 <sup>th</sup> C BCE
Nahum	Nahum	8 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	8 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	8 <sup>th</sup> C BCE
Habakkuk	Habakkuk	6 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	6 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	6 <sup>th</sup> C BCE
Zephaniah	Zephaniah	7 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	7 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	6 <sup>th</sup> C BCE
Haggai	Haggai (or his followers)	Late 6 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	Late 6 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	Late 6 <sup>th</sup> C BCE
Zechariah	1 <sup>st</sup> Zechariah (ch 1 – 8): Zechariah  2 <sup>nd</sup> Zechariah (ch 9 – 14) Unknown	Late 6 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	1 <sup>st</sup> Zechariah: 6 <sup>th</sup> C BCE  2 <sup>nd</sup> Zechariah: 5 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	5 <sup>th</sup> C BCE
Malachi	Malachi (or maybe Ezra the Scribe)	5 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	5 <sup>th</sup> C BCE	5 <sup>th</sup> C BCE

